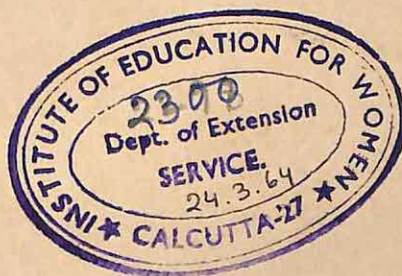
ALPANA

Alpana of the Santiniketan School

ALPANA

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CONTENTS

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To the numerous villagers, particularly women, who have enthusiastically co-operated with us in the work of collecting Alpana designs, we owe a special debt of gratitude. They have not only given us valuable designs, but also provided us with the information necessary for discovering the present state of Alpana in the villages.

Social Education Organisers'
Training Centre, Sriniketan.

S. DAS GUPTA AND COLLEAGUES

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this handbook is to introduce rural social workers to the art known in Bengal as Alpana. It is hoped that it will be of help to the women social education organisers and gram sevikas who are particularly concerned with women's programmes in the Community Development Blocks. For other members of the Block staff also, an acquaintance with this rich heritage of our village life will be of value, since the object of community development is to enrich and enliven rural life in the most comprehensive sense.

A study of Alpanas, and of the 'bratas'* of which they are an integral part, reveals many things that throw light on the artistic life of the people, their customs, religious faiths and their social history. To know the village, a knowledge of Alpana and bratas seems to be indispensable. In fact, it is mainly through the study of the traditional arts, dance, song and literature that we know the inner life of a people, the working of their aspirations and beliefs.

Alpanas are ritual decorations or floor-paintings executed by women and girls in Bengal on the occasion of various pujas and bratas and social ceremonies like marriage, the ceremony of a child's first rice-eating (*Annaprasana*), investiture with sacred thread (*Upanayan*), etc.

Alpanas are painted on the floors and courtyard of the house and the ingredient used is rice paste mixed with water ; it is, therefore, generally white in colour. Only on special occasions are other colours and materials used. Alpanas are done by hand, never with brushes.

It is not as if Alpana is unique to Bengal. It is practised in other forms in other parts of the country and is known by different names. In Gujarat it is known as *Sathiya,* while in Maharashtra it is called *Rangavali.* In Uttar Pradesh the name for Alpana is *Sanjhi,* the reason most probably being that the decorations are meant for exhibition in the evening (Sanjh). Rajasthani women decorate the main entrance to the home, the inner courtyard, rooms and verandahs and even open roofs and terraces with *Mandanas,* while in South Kanara even the kitchen and farms are decorated with Alpanas. Among the tribals, too, a form of wall and floor painting in the nature of pictographs akin to Aplana is found.

Although the form and techniques vary from region to region, and the pujas or

* 'Brata' is a form of semi-religious observance of Bengali women.

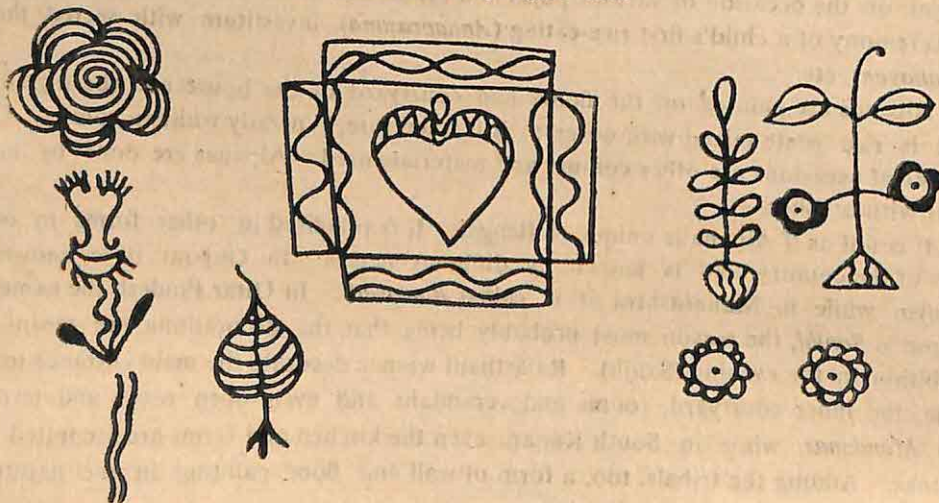
ceremonies with which Alpanas are associated are different, there are certain common elements which deserve our attention.

Firstly, it is an art practised by women exclusively, except among certain aboriginal tribes, and it is often taken up as a community effort. The decorations are in most cases the result of close co-operation between the women of a particular locality *(mohalla* or *para)* or of a whole village.

Secondly, the women who practise this art are not professionals but amateur artists, and they execute the designs only on special occasions, religious or social. In other words, these decorations are ritualistic in nature, and the artists, though they enjoy a considerable measure of freedom, cannot depart radically from convention with regard to the symbols that are used for Alpanas on the occasion of religious or semi-religious ceremonies.

Thirdly, the resources required for executing Alpana designs are very simple and it costs next to nothing. Hence the art can be practised by the poorest villager.

Alpanas give ample proof of the existence through the ages of a highly developed aesthetic sense among our people. This aesthetic sense is in evidence even today despite long years of privation and decay in rural society. Even the most casual observer is struck by the amazing skill and imagination often displayed by our women, and even little girls, in these floor-paintings.

1. Alpana for 'Sanj Pujani' brata

II. ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF ALPANA

The origin of the word Alpana has not been clearly established. It is generally believed that the word derives from the Sanskrit 'alimpon', (which means "to plaster" or "to coat with"). But according to some authorities it is a created Sanskrit word, and the root is non-Aryan. In a note on Alpana in the census report on "Tribes and Castes of West Bengal" (1951), a theory is advanced that Alpana is probably derived from 'ailpona' (or the art of making 'ails' or embankments)—an art practised because of the belief that "these decorative paintings keep the dwelling city or village safe and prosperous and the cultivated land fertile and fruitful by magical representation". Whatever the original meaning of the word Alpana, it seems highly probable that it is an ancient word Sanskritised in recent years. 'Alimpon' or 'Alpana' does not occur in any of the ancient books on art, although 'Rangavali' is mentioned in some of them. 'Rangavali' means "creepers painted in colours", and the description of this art clearly indicates that it was a kind of Alpana. In Sanskrit works like *Kadambari* and *Tilakmanjari* one finds vivid descriptions of the beauty of these designs and the techniques of working them out. Detailed descriptions of Alpana paintings are found in later works like *Kajalrekha* (one of the Mymensingh ballads) and other Bengali works.

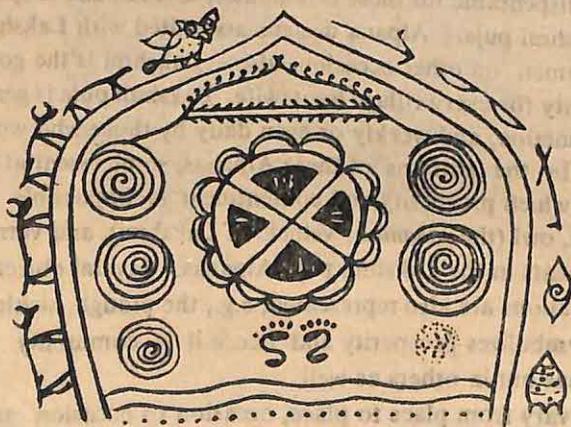
It is difficult to establish the antiquity of the art of Alpana. Many authorities hold that the origin of many of the bratas and pujas with which Alpanas are associated can be traced to remote pre-Aryan times. Ananda Coomaraswamy, the great authority on Indian art, believed that the folk arts which survive in Bengal are directly descended from the "arts of at least 5,000 years ago". Holding the same view, Gurusadaya Dutta, the founder of the Bratachari movement and a scholar of Bengali folk art and culture, pointed out that the lotus flower designs used by rural Bengali women in the centre of many of their circular Alpana paintings are an exact continuation of the lotus designs employed in Mohenjo-daro. There are other students who have suggested that "certain forms and motifs found in Alpana drawings are heiroglyphic in character" and that Alpana can, therefore, be traced to pictographic representations of ancient times.

Yet other scholars hold that Alpanas have come down to us from the Austric people (such as the Mundas) who lived in the country long before the coming of the Aryans. According to them, "these ritualistic and traditional folk arts of Bengal (including Alpana) originally belonged to the agricultural stage. Those who lived in that stage had developed peculiar beliefs in certain forms of deities and in magical practices for the

symbols which, we guess, have ritualistic significance—the decoration can, on every occasion, have many new features.

In some places it was found that a daubing of rice-paste served as a substitute for an Alpana, but a puja would not be complete without even this poor substitute.

Another interesting fact is that Bagdi or Dom girls, not well versed in this art, sometimes take the help of other Scheduled Caste women who have access to the homes of the upper caste Hindus. The decorations painted by the high caste women spread to the huts of the backward classes in this way.

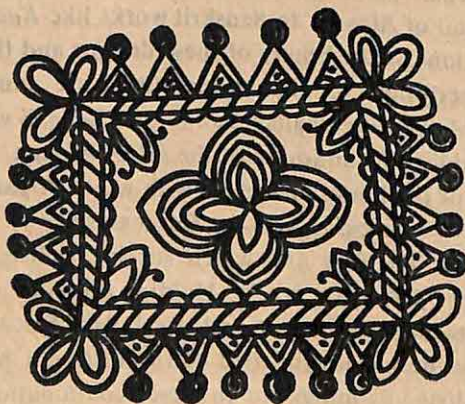
The survey revealed that the art of Alpana is not being practised as widely as it used to be. In several villages it is only the elderly women who possess skill and knowledge of Alpana. The young women know little and most of the girls are almost totally ignorant of the art. It seems that, everywhere, Alpana designs reflect some basic desires or needs of the people. The Lakshmi puja Alpana, for instance, clearly reflects the desire for prosperity. The persistent use of certain special symbols in every Alpana and the insistence on the association of Alpana with certain important religious ceremonies make one believe that Alpana at the moment exists more as a necessary ritual and a religious rite than as a desire to impart colour and gaiety to every-day life. Interest in Alpanas, as also in many traditional forms of pujas and bratas, is dwindling in the villages. There is every possibility that, if the interest is not revived, in a few decades the art of Alpana will be lost or will linger in a decadent form—as mere combinations of lines without beauty, practised as a ritual without creative force.

3. **Lakshmi Puja Alpana**

IV. THE SANTINIKETAN ALPANA

Alpana as taught at Santiniketan is a highly developed decorative art. But though it bears the same name, this secular art school is removed from the life of the people and is in many respects different from the Alpana of Bengali rural homes. This is not to say that there has never been or can never be any point of contact between these two forms of Alpana. On the contrary, it is our purpose to suggest the lines along which a new type of Alpana design, offering a synthesis between the old and the new and combining the best aspects of both, could be evolved. There are certain basic elements which are common to both, like the derivation of abstract decorative forms from a study of natural objects (leaves, creepers, etc.), reliance on circular curves and various traditional representations. But apart from these, Santiniketan has been influenced by a multitude of designs from various other sources, especially the designs of the ancient cave-paintings and temples. To the artists of Santiniketan beauty has been the only consideration and they have been eclectic in attitude. And being free from the demands of religious ceremonies, they have dispensed with the symbolic representations which are an indispensable part of any Alpana meant for a puja or brata.

This, then, is the fundamental difference. The Santiniketan Alpana does not have religious significance or any ritualistic meaning. The decorative, aesthetic value is the only thing that counts. Many Santiniketan Alpanas are exquisitely beautiful specimens of decorative art, but they do not seem to meet the villagers' needs. The character of these Alpanas, too, is different ; for not only are they the products of careful planning and involve intricate drawing which can be mastered only after a fairly long period of training, the manner of executing them is also radically different. In short, the Alpana practised by the trained, sophisticated artists and the women who are influenced by them is different from the spontaneous and free creations of the rural womenfolk who draw their inspiration from the traditional designs handed down from generation to generation. Abanindranath Tagore, who made a pioneer study of the indigenous Alpanas, points out that the graceful lines painted freely and spontaneously and with admirable ease do not suffer for the lack of mathematical precision. The spirit of abandon that is found in these compositions has a beauty of its own. We are not making any invidious comparison of the Alpanas of village women with those of their more sophisticated sisters. What we wish to emphasize is that the Alpanas of the village women have certain qualities which are well worth preserving.

supply of ample crops and for driving out evil spirits". If this is true, the theory of Alpana being derived from 'ailpona' or the art of making embankments does not seem to be very improbable. "The ingredients used in such drawings," it is pointed out, "mainly consisting of rice powder, rice-paste diluted in water, dry colour powders produced from dried up leaves, charcoal, burnt earth, etc., have Austric affiliations. Even the motifs and designs of these drawings appear to be the contribution of the Austrics... It is now beyond little doubt that some of the very important socio-religious concepts and rituals of our country are the contributions of the Austrics."

Analysing the bratas of Bengali women, Abanindranath Tagore advanced the idea that many of them are of very ancient origin ; there are rites called 'Anyabrata' (men professing a different cult) by the Aryans. The pure bratas, he thought, were tampered with by Brahmanism. But whatever be their origin and early development, the bratas provide the clue to the meaning and significance of Alpanas in the religious and social life of Bengal.

2. Alpana for Marriage Ceremony

III. DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL ALPANA

Although the origin and development of Alpana and its relation to religious practices have been touched upon, it is not the purpose of this handbook to attempt a study of the history and evolution of this art. Our purpose is to find out the present state of Alpana. Does Alpana still survive as a vivid form of art in the villages today, or is it in a decadent and moribund condition ? What are the pujas, bratas and other ceremonies with which Alpanas are associated today ? Who in the family generally take to this art ? What significance does Alpana have for those who practise this art and for the other participants in the social and religious ceremonies ? Do Alpanas have any relation to the total social structure of the family and of the village ? We summarise below some of the findings of those who recently surveyed this problem in many villages of Bengal.

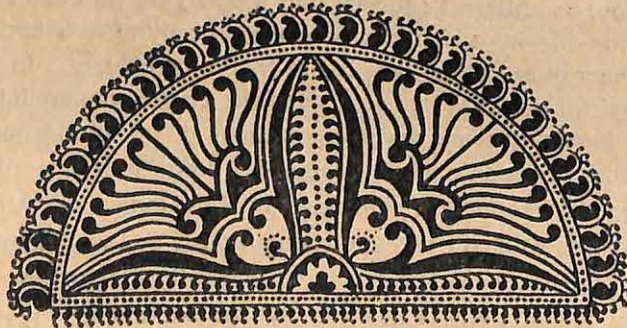
There are about forty different pujas, bratas and other ceremonies which are celebrated during the year. Many of them are, of course, observed only by certain groups and not by all ; the bratas, for example, are mainly celebrated by women, and dharma puja is the exclusive concern of a section of the Scheduled Castes. Some of these pujas are public functions, while others are domestic in nature.

Alpanas are used in about ten to twelve of these pujas and bratas. Floor-paintings are considered to be indispensable for these ceremonies, and Alpana is specially important on the occasion of Lakshmi puja. Alpana designs associated with Lakshmi puja are freely used by village women on other occasions also. Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth and beauty. She is the deity for every village housewife. Lakshmi puja is generally held thrice in a year as a public function, and weekly or even daily by those who worship Lakshmi as a household deity. In the patterns of these Alpanas, some essential elements of life are represented without which prosperity and contentment is impossible. For instance, the paddy stalk, granary, owl (the *vahana* or vehicle of Lakshmi), and vermilion box are some of the common elements in the Lakshmi puja Alpanas. Several objects which are essential for agricultural operations are also represented, e.g., the plough, sickle, sun and 'measure of rice'. The fish symbolizes prosperity and hence it is commonly found not only in Lakshmi puja Alpanas but in others as well.

Alpana designs vary from place to place, occasion to occasion and from person to person. Various patterns are used for a single ceremony, and different patterns are used for the same ceremony in different villages. The artist seems to enjoy a great deal of freedom ; in spite of the necessity of representing certain symbols in every Alpana—

In Santiniketan, Alpanas are used on all ceremonial occasions but no particular form of Alpana is related to any particular occasion. Alpanas are used for decorating any meeting place, be it a children's literary meeting or a reception for a visiting dignitary. The entrance to the Mandir is decorated on special occasions. On New Year's Day, Tagore's Birthday, Vriksha-ropana Utsava (tree planting festival), Halakarshana Utsava (ploughing festival), Silpa Utsava (industry festival), Vasanta Utsava (spring festival), Magh Mela (Annual Sriniketan festival) and on various other occasions Alpanas are executed by teachers and students of the Kala Bhavan.

In the urban areas of Bengal, due to the influence of artists who have taken upon themselves the task of re-creating traditional designs and creating new ones, women are taking a new interest in Alpana. In fact, Alpana of the new type is a living art in quite a few Bengali homes and promises to become more and more popular in future. But these Alpanas, particularly the Alpana of Santiniketan, are fundamentally different from those that we find in the villages, in the sense that the forms are not associated with any brata or puja. They are 'secular' Alpanas used for social ceremonies.

There is a real danger that we have to guard against when introducing modern types of Alpana in the villages. Modifications, innovations there must be. Where stagnation has actually set in, new forms are necessary for revitalising the stereotyped, archaic compositions. The women who have forgotten this art have to be introduced not only to the primitive art handed down by grandmother to mother, but also to the new types of decorations which are gaining popularity in the urban areas due to the influence of art schools. But we must seriously search for the right approach to the question of teaching new Alpana designs. It should be an approach that will bring fresh life to this old art, and not supplant it by a new one.

4. A Santiniketan Alpana

V. PROGRAMME FOR REVIVAL OF THE ART

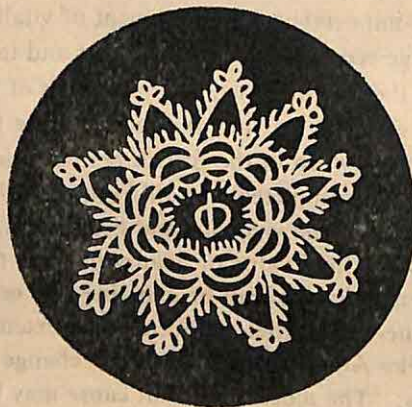
Why is it that the indigenous Alpanas are dying out ? In what way and to what extent have the disintegration of community life, poverty, change in tastes, lack of faith in old religious beliefs, culture and traditions in general, and other causes contributed to this deterioration ? Obviously, an understanding of the relative importance of these factors is required if any scheme for regeneration of the art is to succeed.

Among the causes of the general decay of rural culture of which the decline of Alpana is part, the break-up and disorganisation of the rural economy and social life would appear to be of basic importance. Replacement of vitally inter-dependent family units in a self-sufficient village economy by a commercial and individualistic order, loss of faith in older values among the intelligentsia, the movement of the enlightened section to the towns, all these had the effect of starting and accelerating the decay of the rural arts. In fact the urban culture that grew up in the British period and the educational system that developed with it was so completely cut off from the soil that among the educated there was widespread ignorance of the vigorous and beautiful art traditions of the people. They were unable to see any spiritual value or beauty in these folk arts.

While the decay of rural crafts can be explained by ecnomic factors such as the competition of cheap machine-made articles, and to some extent by a change of taste, the causes of decay of arts like Alpana lie mainly in the change of tastes and attitudes among the elite of society. The most significant cause may be lack of religious faith, since Alpana is primarily a ritual. People at the lower rung of the social ladder sooner or later follow those at the top, and it can be easily imagined how the change in attitude of those who set the fashion has affected the attitude of the common people. Folk tradition dies hard, but the trend can be very well perceived.

Since independence there has been a revival of interest in indigenous arts and crafts on the part of the educated. The trend can be accelerated if the teaching of Alpana is incorporated in the school syllabus for girls. Along with it, many other decorative arts which used to be widely practised by village women in the past could find a place in the curriculum. Since various art institutions are turning out graduates many of whom take up the teaching of art in schools, teachers will not be difficult to find. But, as pointed out earlier, there is a big difference between art school Alpanas and the indigenous ones, and if the latter are to be revived and revitalized, the teachers themselves must first be properly oriented so that they can experiment with the blending

of traditional forms with newer motifs and designs. A knowledge of the indigenous Alpanas is, therefore, essential for them. Without it the old forms and all that is good in them will die.

The gram sevikas and social education organisers can popularise Alpana by using it in various social ceremonies connected with Community Development work and by encouraging its use by village women for all types of ceremonies, social and religious.

5. Alpana for Surya (Sun-God) Puja

VI. SYNTHESIS OF OLD AND NEW FORMS

If we are to revive Alpana where it has nearly died out, and revitalize it in village celebrations, we cannot obviously ask the villagers to change their existing patterns all of a sudden and introduce patterns that are altogether new. The new patterns must contain the elements which are to be found in the old. The Alpana material should continue to be rice-paste, and the designs should reflect the life around. They should include symbols like the fish, the sickle and the plough, all of which give a definite meaning to the Alpana. Without these essential elements, the new Alpana will remain a novelty and cannot become a vital part of rural life. The urge for ornamentation is important, but the ritualistic role that Alpana plays is more real today to the average villager. The need that Alpana fulfills is religious as well as social. A new pattern of Alpana must take cognizance of these needs and attempt to meet them. In the illustrations given in this handbook, some specimens of Alpanas have been presented which in their form follow the new type of Alpana introduced by Tagore's school, but contain the essential elements of the traditional Alpana without which a villager would not normally accept it for his bratas and pujas.

Culture is an acquired practice which is handed down from generation to generation, and it plays a vital function in the maintenance of the social structure. Alpana, in making the pujas and bratas colourful, contributes to the maintenance of the social structure. Let it therefore be emphasized once again that the new Alpanas that we introduce must take into consideration this fact and include the traditional motifs without which the Alpana patterns will not fit into the life patterns of the people.

This applies also to the materials used for making Alpanas. The urban artist may find chalk dust better for use than rice-paste, but rice and paddy are the symbols of life. The use of rice paste is thus a necessary part of the religious ceremonies of a community. In introducing the new Alpana we have got to keep the rice-paste till the villagers gradually accept new materials.

If Alpana is to be revived, new stamina and new patterns must be injected into the dying art, but, we repeat, the new must not trample upon the old forms and motifs but honour them and embody them, so that Alpana becomes the treasure of every home.

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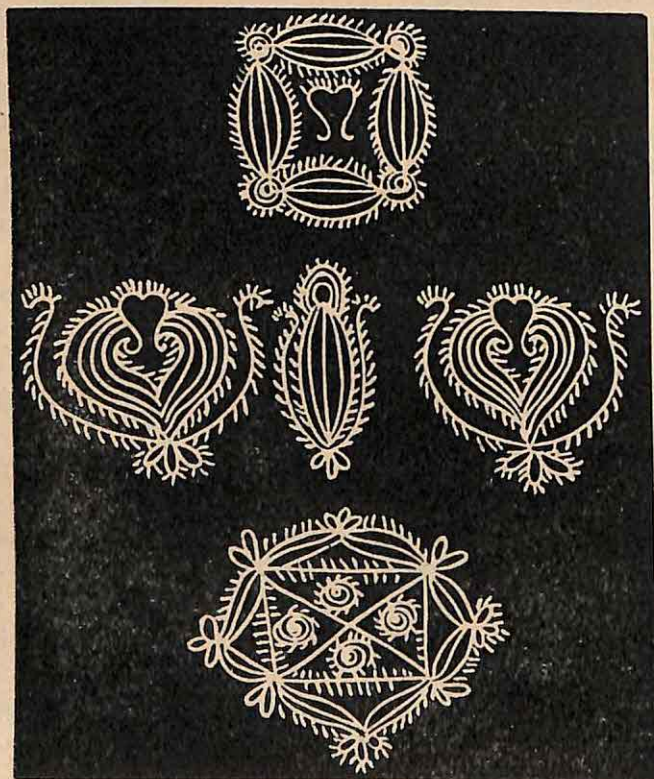
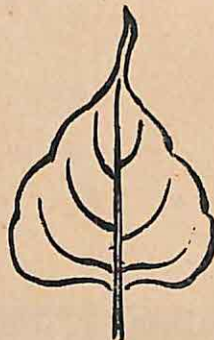
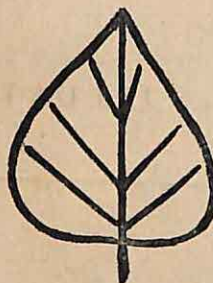

ILLUSTRATIONS

BASIC PRINCIPLES AND TECHNIQUE OF EXECUTION

Every object has an original form and an abstract form can be derived from it. This abstract form is encompassed by an outline that ignores many of the details in the original form. For the inner arrangements of an abstract form, one has to combine the various units that can go to the making of an appropriate design. The design must have balance and symmetry. Variety may be achieved, and new designs created by combining one abstract form with the inner arrangements of another form. The more units and forms that an artist can derive from observation of nature, the more variety can he bring to his designs.

6. Original forms in nature

7. Abstractions of natural forms

8. Various types of decorative units

9. Designs made of abstract form and decorative units

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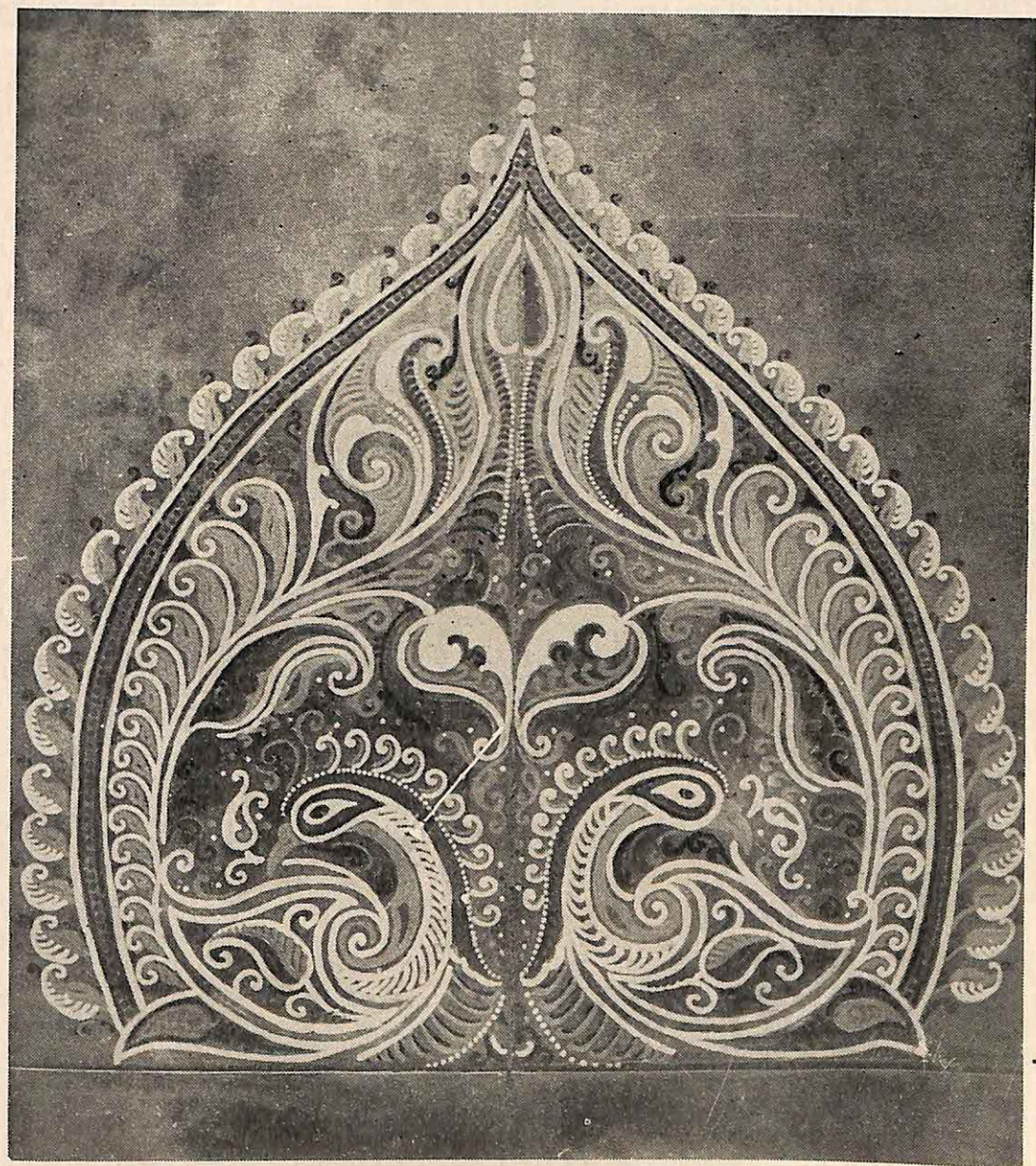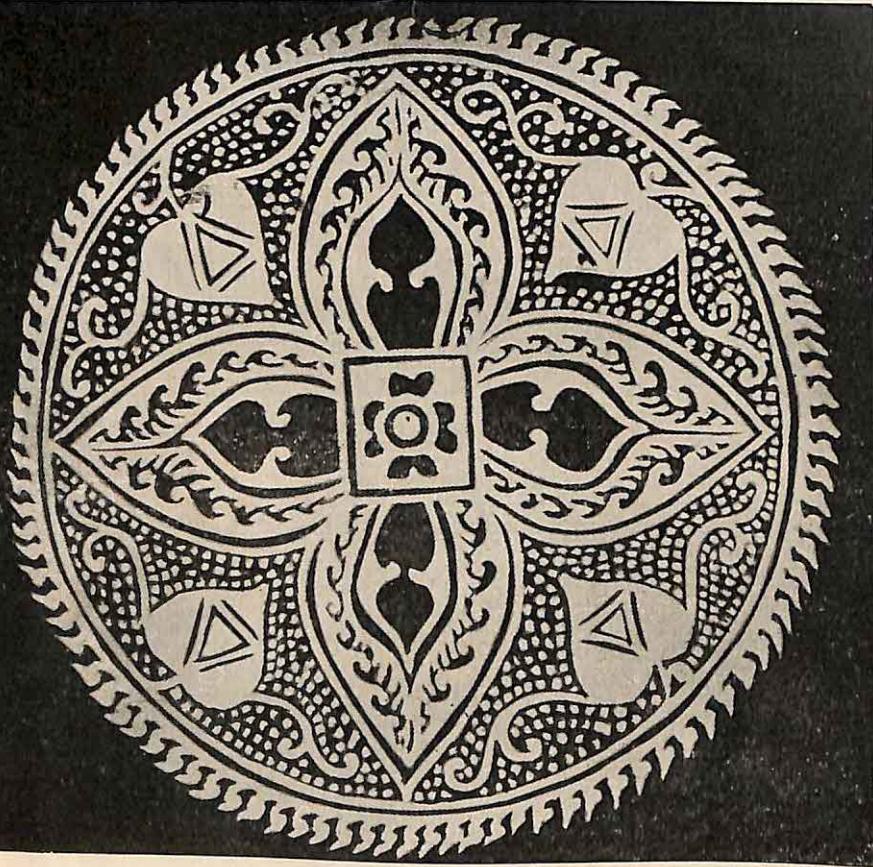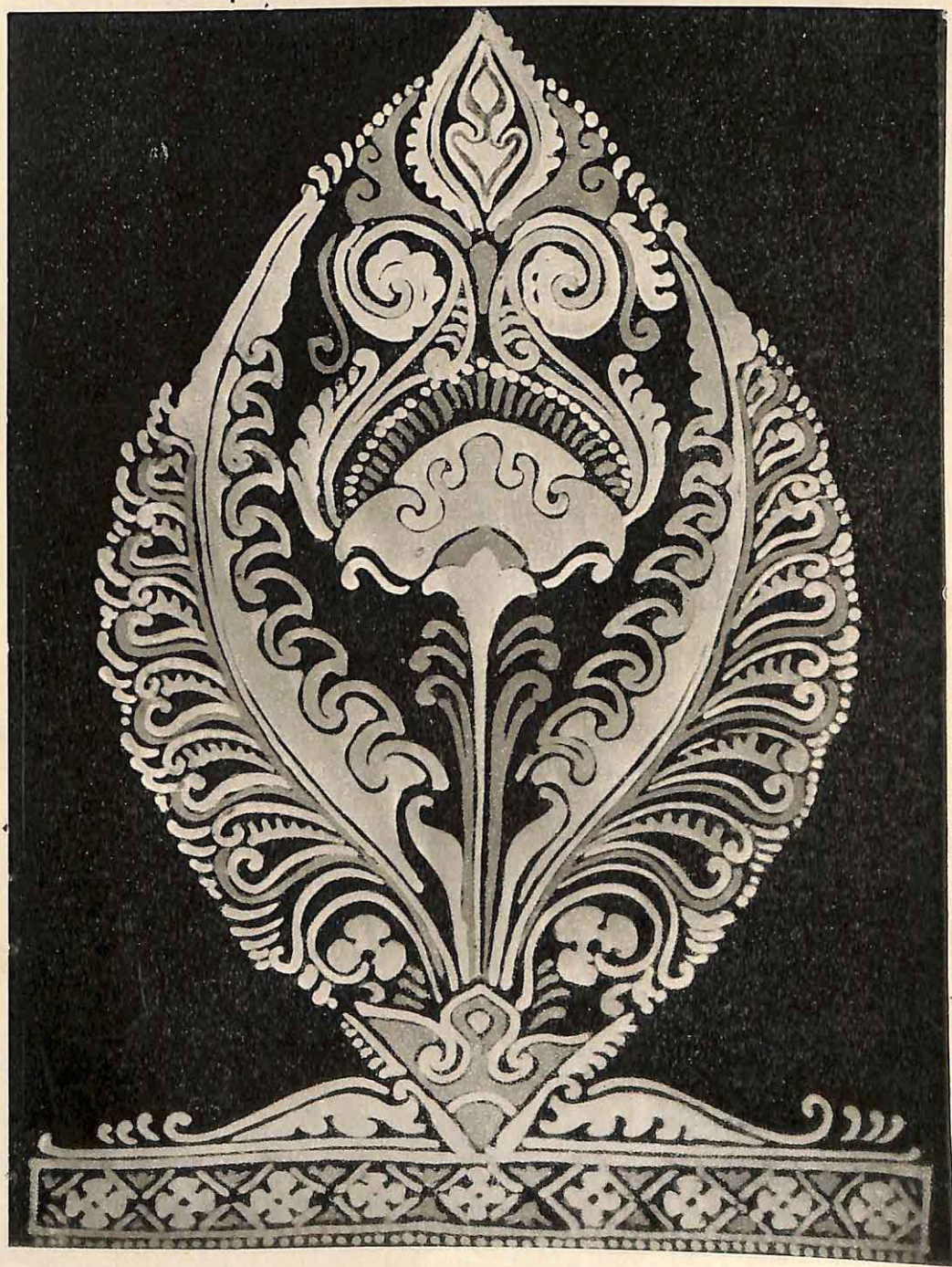
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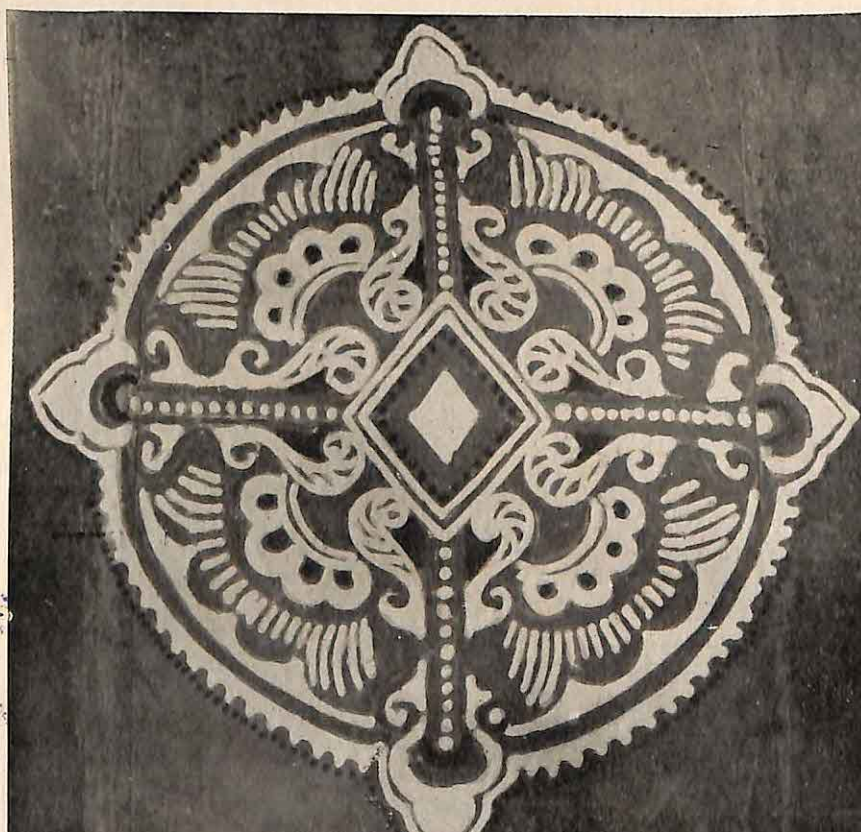
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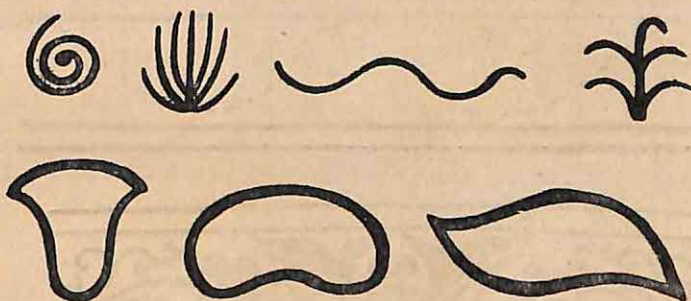
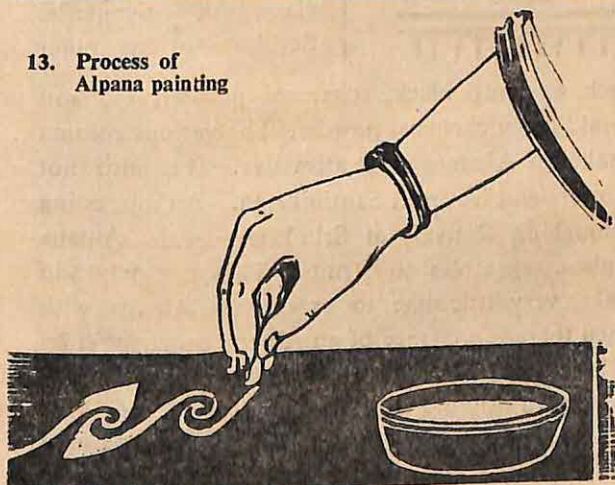
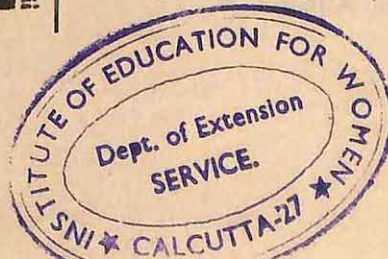
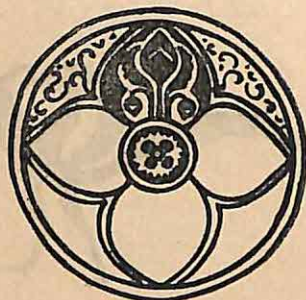
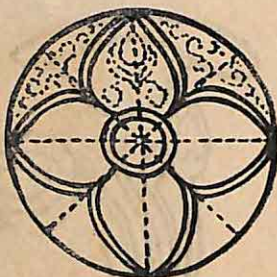
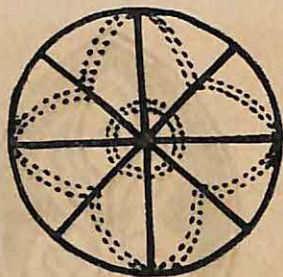
10. **Balanced forms**

11. **Symmetrical forms**

12. **Some more decorative units derived out of natural forms**

13. **Process of Alpana painting**

The media materials required for Alpana are simple and very few. A handful of sunned rice (*atap chaul*) and a small piece of cloth are the basic requirements for painting an Alpana. The rice is moistened with water and made into thick paste. Enough water is added to obtain a paste of proper consistency to facilitate the drawing of lines. The piece of cloth is immersed in the paste, held in the lower part of the palm (or at the

20-21. Development of Santiniketan type of Alpana step by step

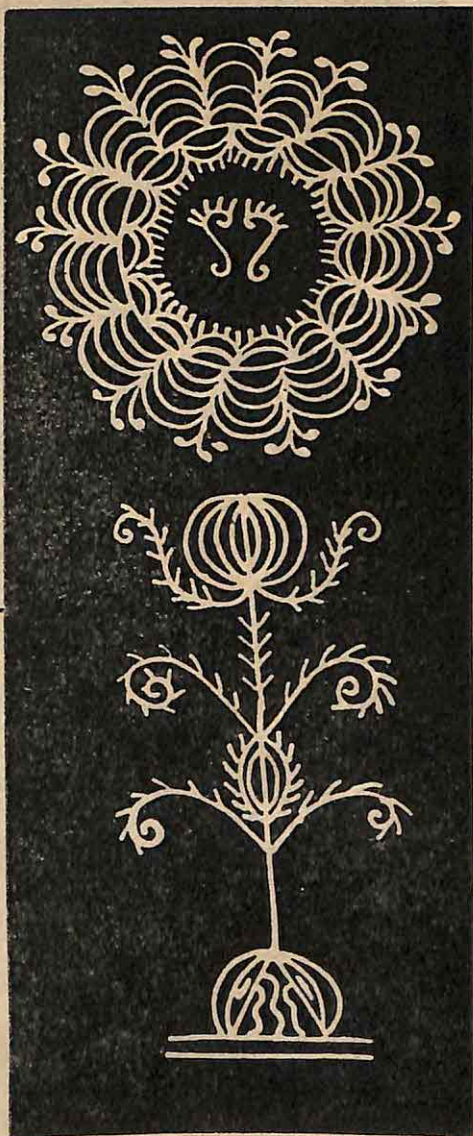
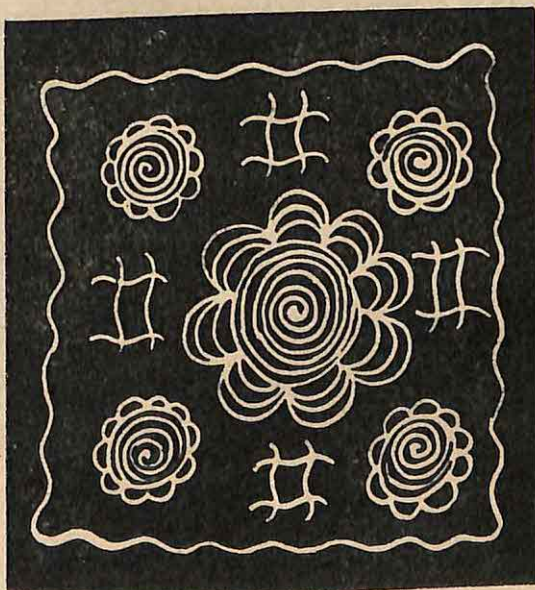
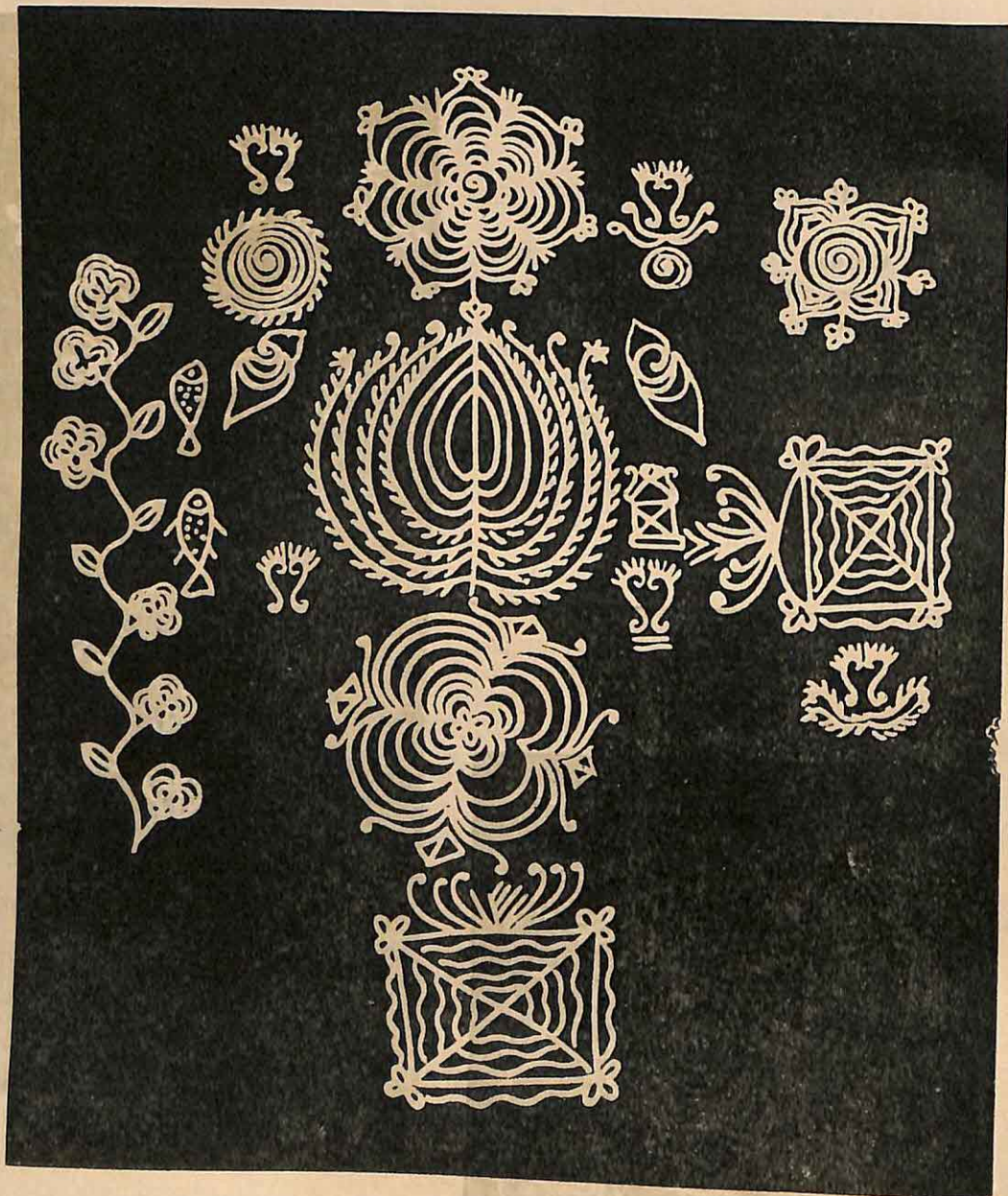
root of the fingers) and the paste is released and allowed to trickle down the ring finger, which moves along to make the design.

The diagrams show how an Alpana of Santiniketan type is evolved step by step. In the Santiniketan Alpanas, white chalk powder is also used in place of rice-paste. Besides, various other coloured materials are also used, such as lamp black, charcoal powder, red soil (*lal mati*), yellow soil and brown or emerald green chemical powder. The various colours in appropriate combinations help to make the Alpanas more attractive. It is also not uncommon to see Alpanas made with flowers and leaves at Santiniketan. An interesting feature of the Halakarshana Festival (ploughing festival) at Sriniketan is the Alpana made with a variety of grains, cereals, pulses, vegetables and fruits. They not only add colour and beauty to the designs ; it takes very little time to execute an Alpana with these ingredients. During the rains, when there is a chance of an Alpana being spoilt by rain, it is wiser to make the Alpana with these materials a short while before the ceremony.

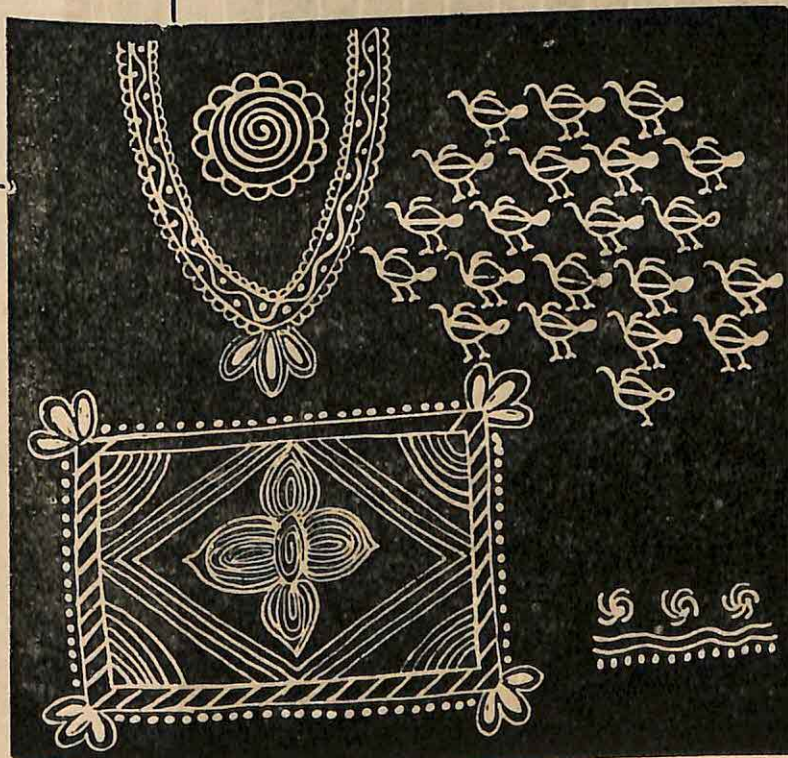
When it is desired that the Alpanas drawn should last for some time, the little quantity of glue (acasia glue or Babla gum) is mixed with the different liquid media used for painting Alpanas.

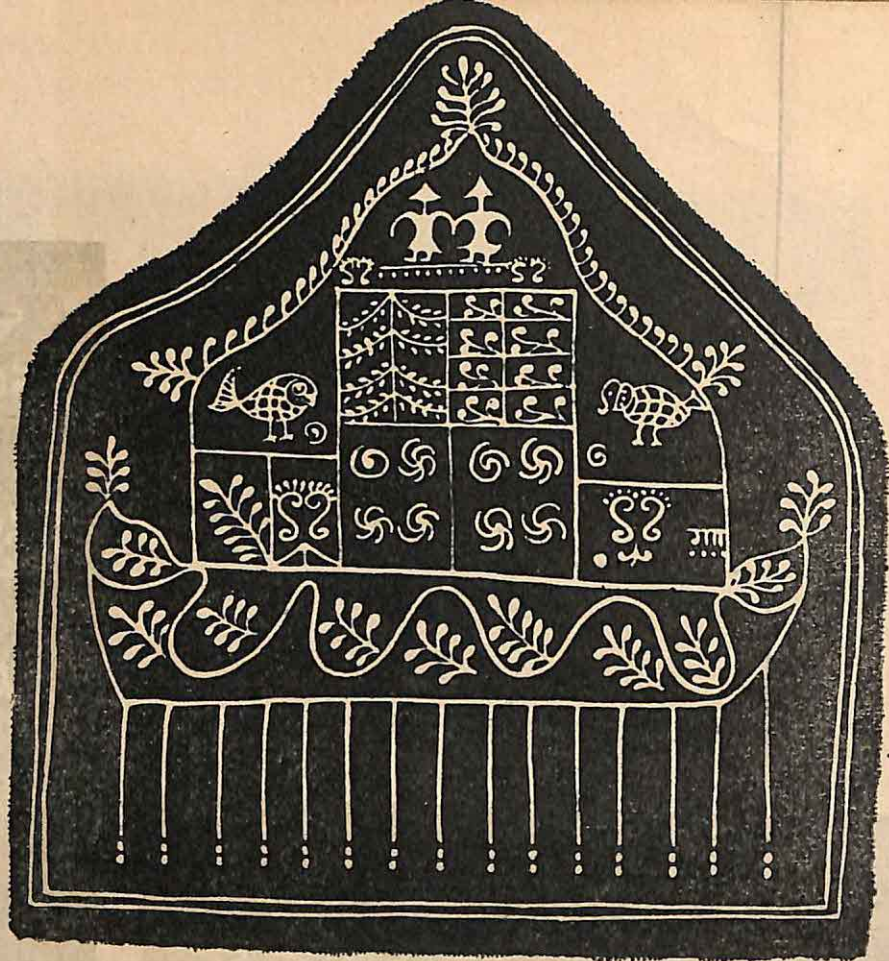
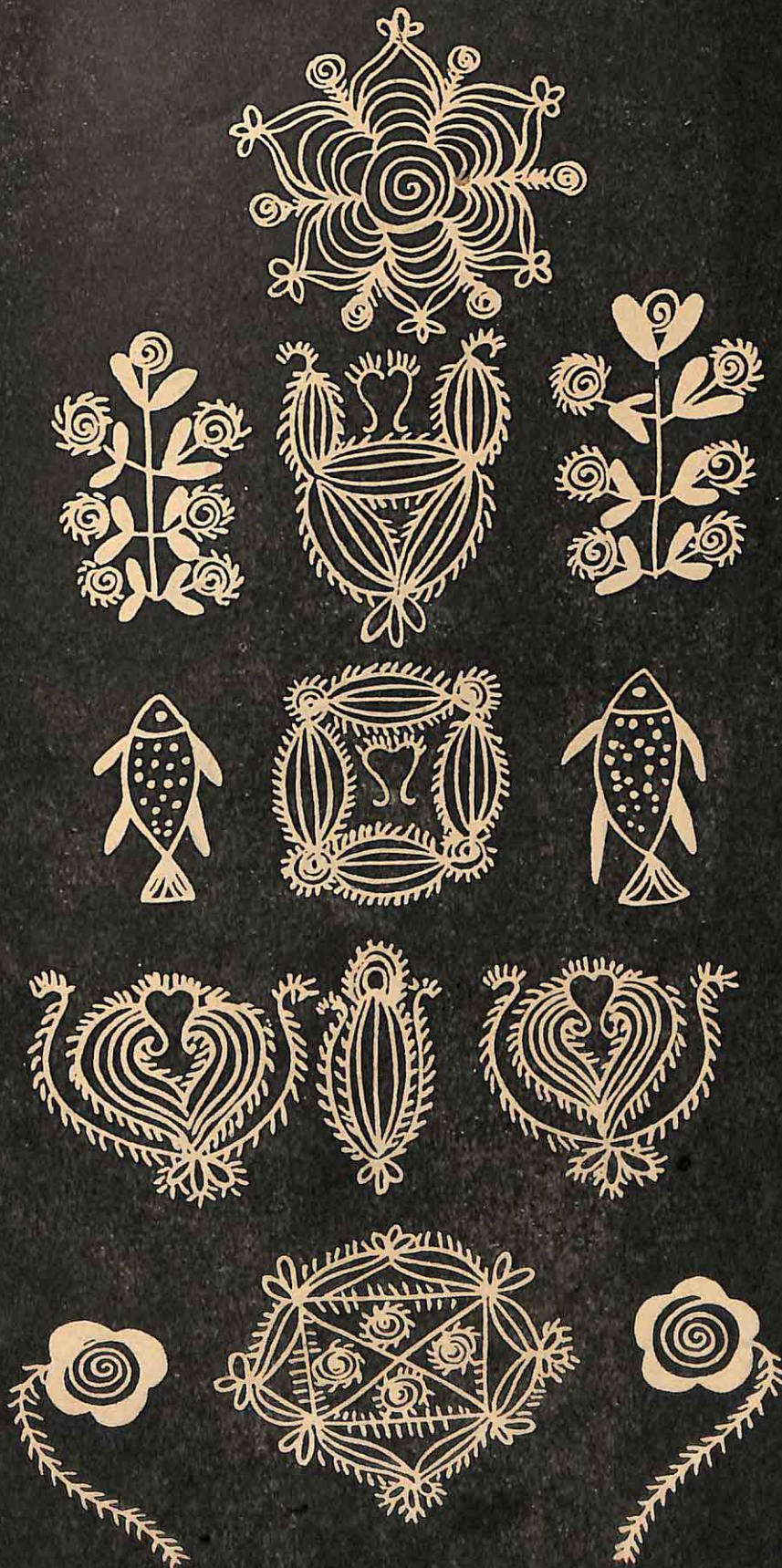
VILLAGE ALPANAS

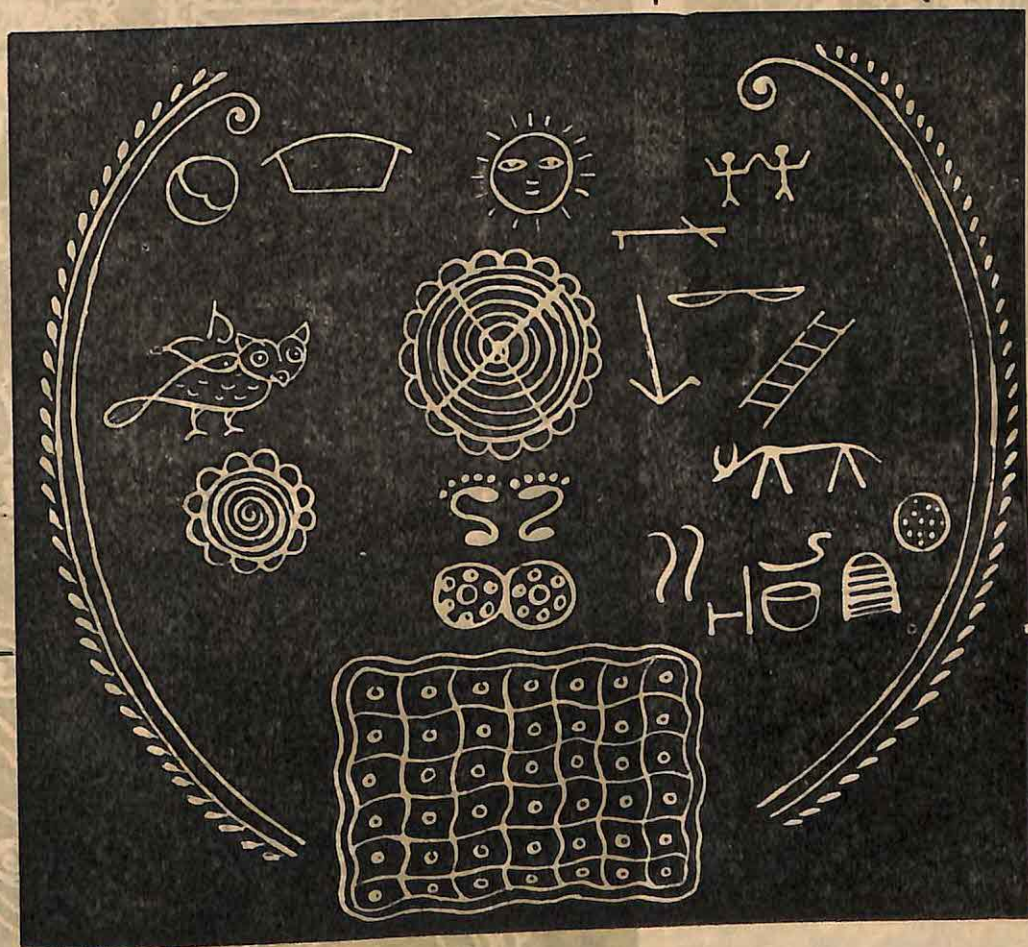
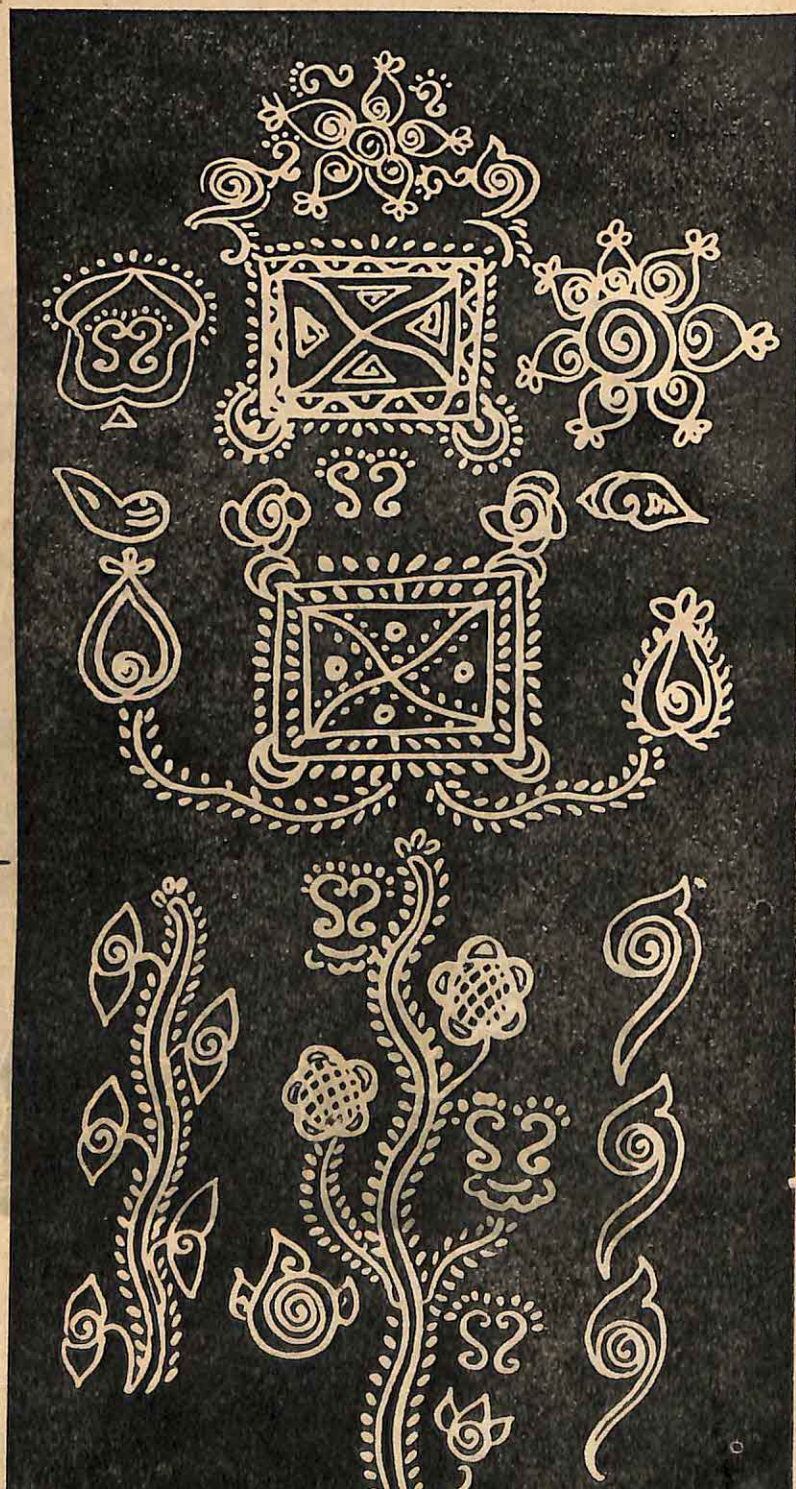
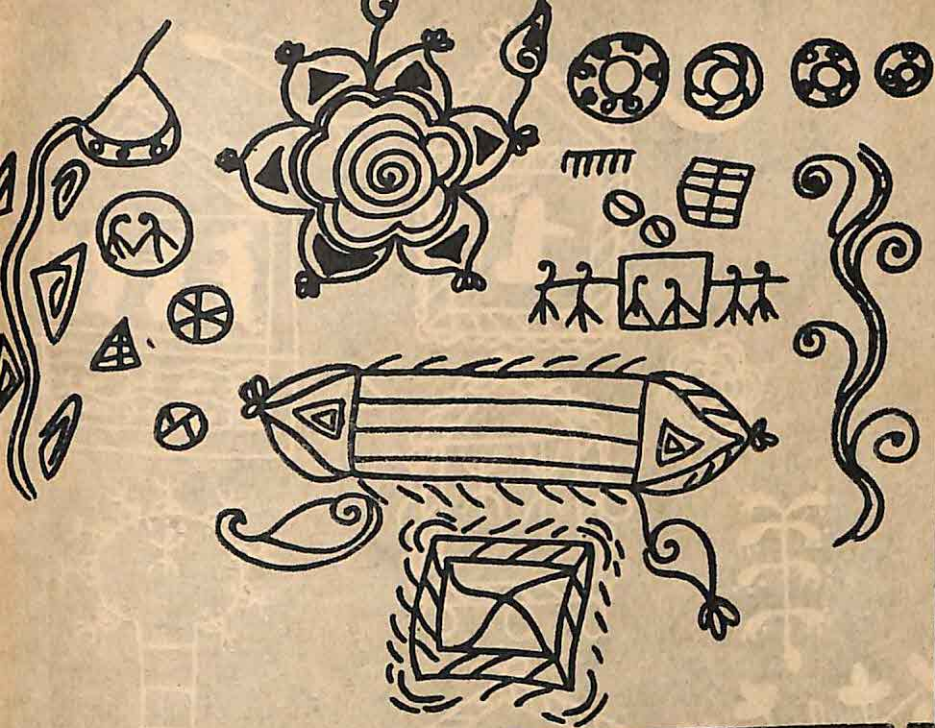
The Alpanas reproduced here have been collected from a number of villages (mainly from the districts of Burdwan and Birbhum). These are some of the still surviving Alpana designs and are intimately connected with religious rituals and rites. Simple materials like rice-paste, etc., are used for the preparation of these Alpanas.

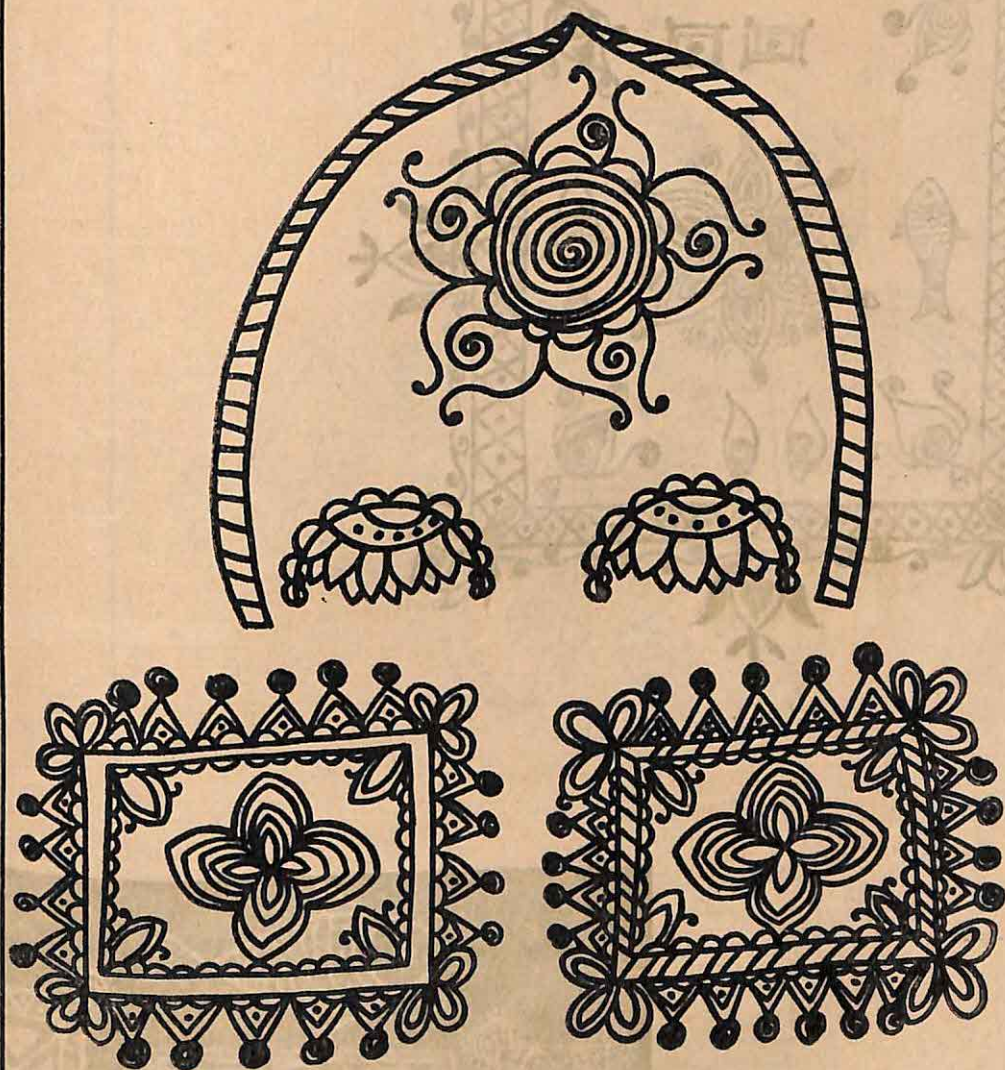
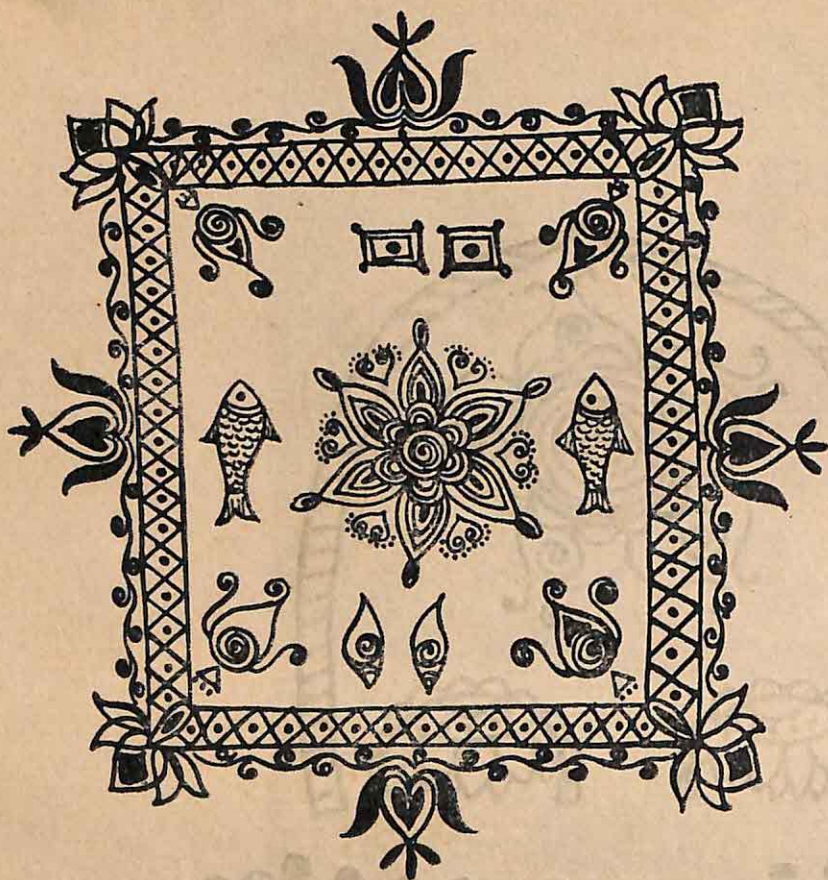
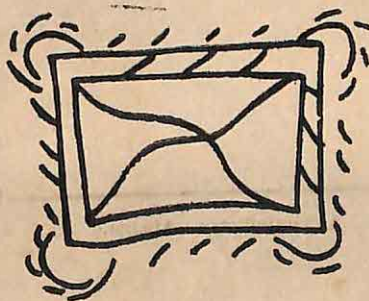
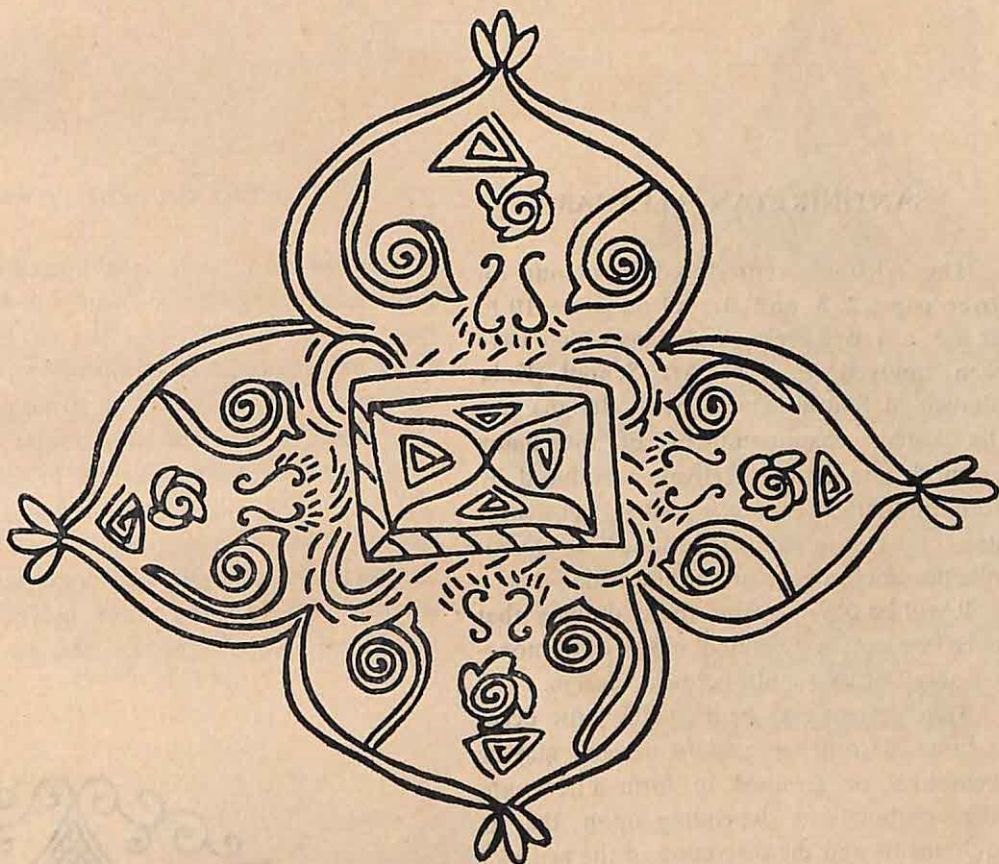
22. 'Mutpuja' Alpana

23. 'Haricharan brata' Alpana

24. Alpana for all Pujas

25. Alpana for all Pujas

26. Alpana for Subachani Puja

27. Alpana for 'Lakshmi' Puja during the month of 'Pausa' (to be painted on the wall)

28. Alpana for 'Lakshmi' Puja

29. Alpana for 'Lakshmi' Puja

30. Alpana for 'Lakshmi' Puja on every Thursday throughout the year

31-32. Alpanas for 'Lakshmi' Puja

33-34. Two more Alpanas for 'Lakshmi' Puja

35-36. Alpanas for 'Sanj pujani' brata

37. Alpana for "Sanj Pujani" brata

38. Alpana for marriage occasion

39-40. Alpanas for marriage ceremonies

41. Alpana for 'Satyanarayan' Puja

SANTINIKETAN ALPANAS

The Alpanas reproduced in colour on cover pages 2, 3 and 4 and on pages 19 to 22 are a few specimen designs which have been revived by the Art School (Kala Bhavan at Santiniketan. Such designs are the usual accompaniment of the many cultural and secular festivals introduced by Rabindranath Tagore. Most of these designs are no longer confined to Santiniketan but have spread far and wide.

It will be obvious from these designs that each one can be executed either as a mono-coloured or as a multi-coloured design.

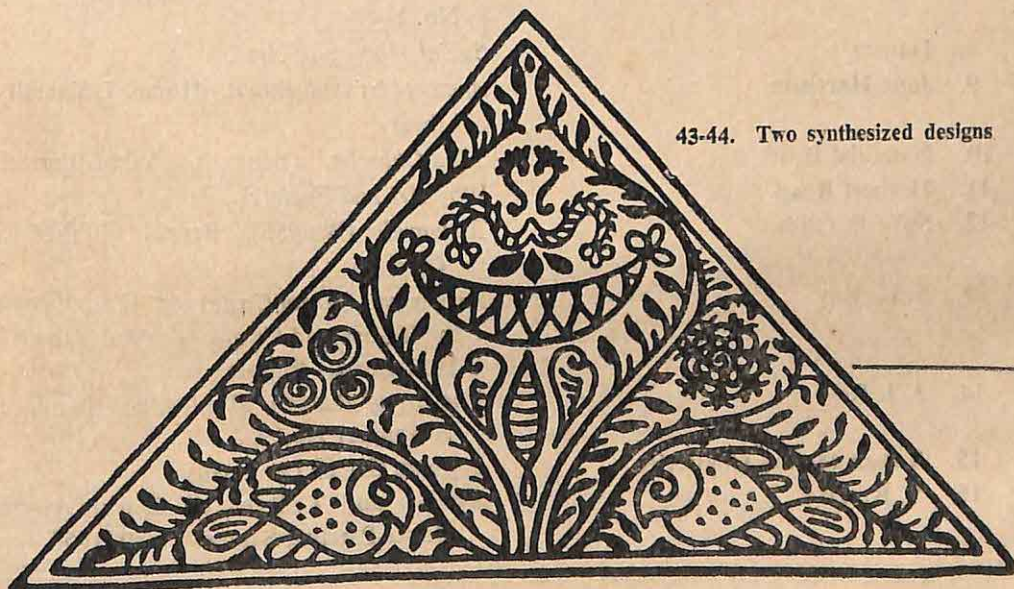
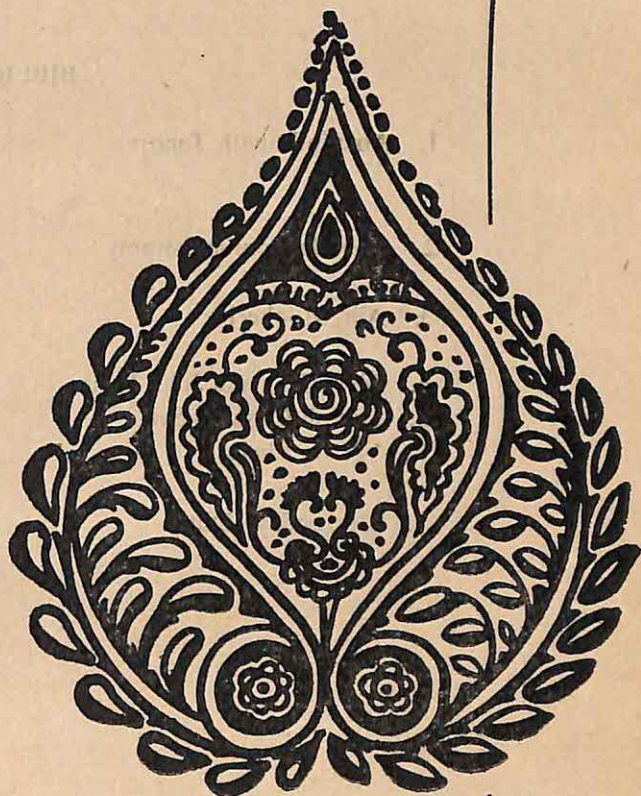
The designs may be used singly for decoration. Two or more of the designs may be combined or grouped to form a new unit, the combinations depending upon the requirements and the discretion of the artist.

42. A Santiniketan Alpana.

SYNTHESIZED DESIGNS

The village Alpana designs reflect the vital elements of village life intimately linked with the religious and social life of the community. The Santiniketan Alpana provides a new approach to decoration. The two designs reproduced here are examples of new types of Alpana which present village motifs in Santiniketan style.

The top design contains the elements in the present village Alpana No. 1 on page 6.

The design below contains the elements in the present village Alpana No. 28 on page 28.

43-44. Two synthesized designs

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Alpana of the Santiniketan School